

SEASONAL OCCUPATION BY THE COOT, *FULICA ATRA*, OF THE SWAN RIVER AT MAYLANDS, W.A.

By R.H. STRANGER

28/76 East Street, Maylands, W.A. 6051

INTRODUCTION

The Coot, *Fulica atra*, is known to inhabit the Swan River upstream of the Causeway (Serventy 1948; Serventy and Whittell 1976). But observations by me over many years at Maylands revealed that the number of Coots occupying the river varied significantly and that sometimes it was completely absent. Consequently I recorded Coot numbers on the river at Maylands for one year in 1991.

THE OBSERVATIONS

The seasonal occupation of the river by the Coot is shown in Figure 1, the species being most abundant in autumn and early winter and completely absent, or nearly so, between late winter and early summer. Its abundance in autumn is paralleled on the larger wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain (Storr and Johnstone 1988) and in the Maylands and West Belmont quarries.

The Coot does not range uniformly over the river but primarily distributes itself in the areas shown in Figure 2. It does not occupy the whole of these areas at any one time, is simply transient in mid-river, and frequents some

locations more than others. When it is abundant, flocks of up to 500 birds (Stranger 1993) may form in favoured areas such as Grove Farm Bay and "Coot Bay", but it also forms flocks of any lesser number, it being very gregarious at these times. The areas it frequents would seem to be favoured because they are a source of food, which primarily seems to be an alga.

Another favoured location on the Swan River is where the Bayswater Drain and the continuation of King William Street, Bayswater, intersect with the river. Up to 60 birds may occur there and the locality is just SE of the Bayswater Bird Sanctuary. The warden of the sanctuary tells me that up to 10 pairs of Coots breed there seasonally.

When undisturbed and feeding normally on the river the birds are loosely scattered, perhaps a metre or so apart, and continually dive for food. A feature of its diving is that it jumps upwards before submerging (Slater 1989). This is also true for the American Coot, *Fulica americana* (Robbins *et al.* 1983). When the river is flowing in winter the Coots may feed on the surface, pecking at any item of food floating by.

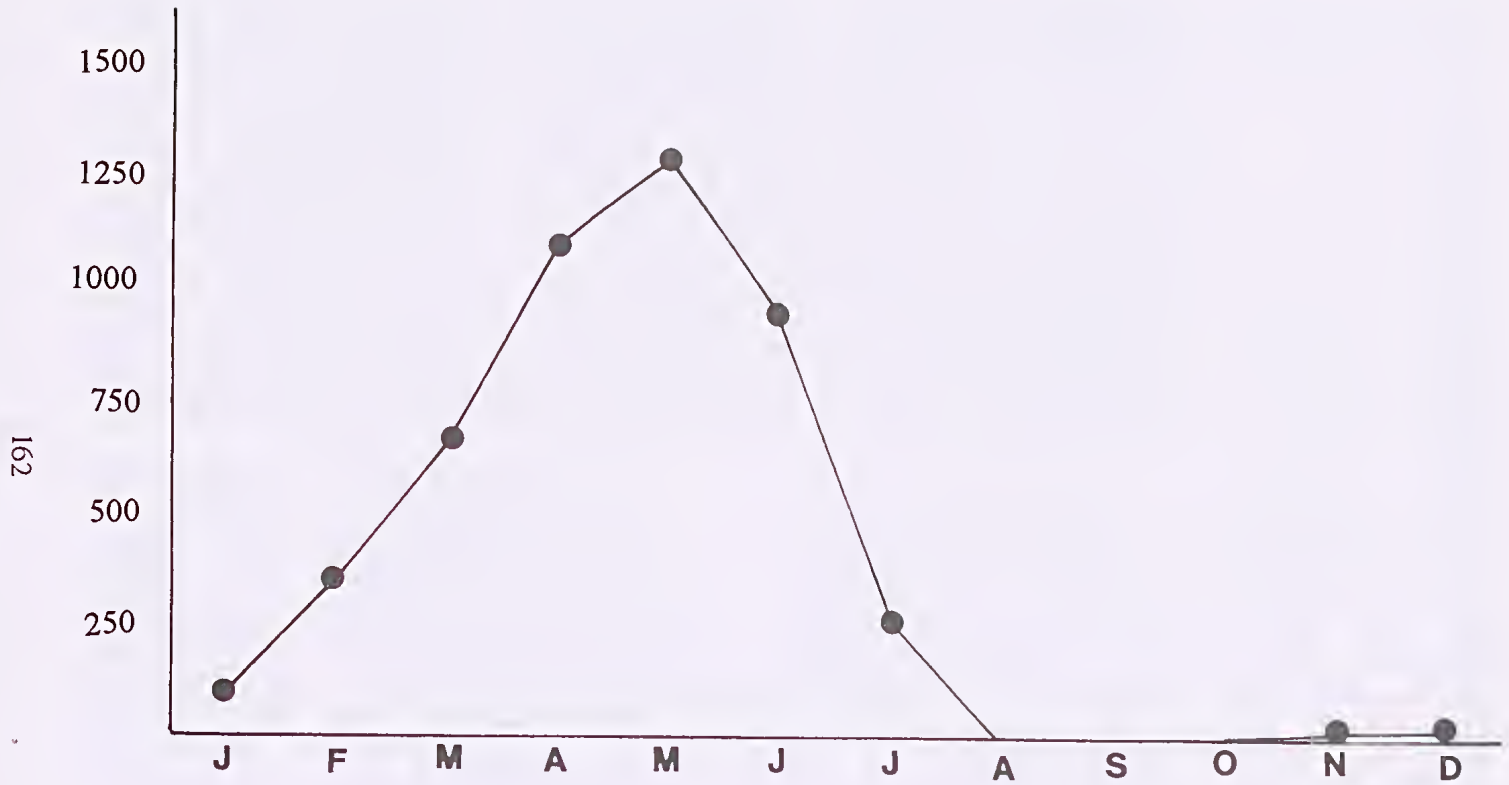


Figure 1. Graph showing monthly totals of Coots on the Swan River at Maylands in 1991.

When disturbed by river traffic the birds will bunch together, will discontinue feeding, and may resort to flight to avoid the disturbance. Individuals may still be feeding at dusk, though most birds will have taken shelter by then. They depend on the riverside vegetation for nocturnal shelter and the areas they inhabit have such shelter. However some areas of the river with seemingly good

shelter are not frequented and during the day birds will frequent and be seen resting at places devoid of shelter.

The Coot does not breed on the river (Stranger 1993) but in past years small numbers bred in the Mayland quarries, when the water level was lower. One large dependent chick was seen in the south quarry on 2 December 1991. The south quarry supports a

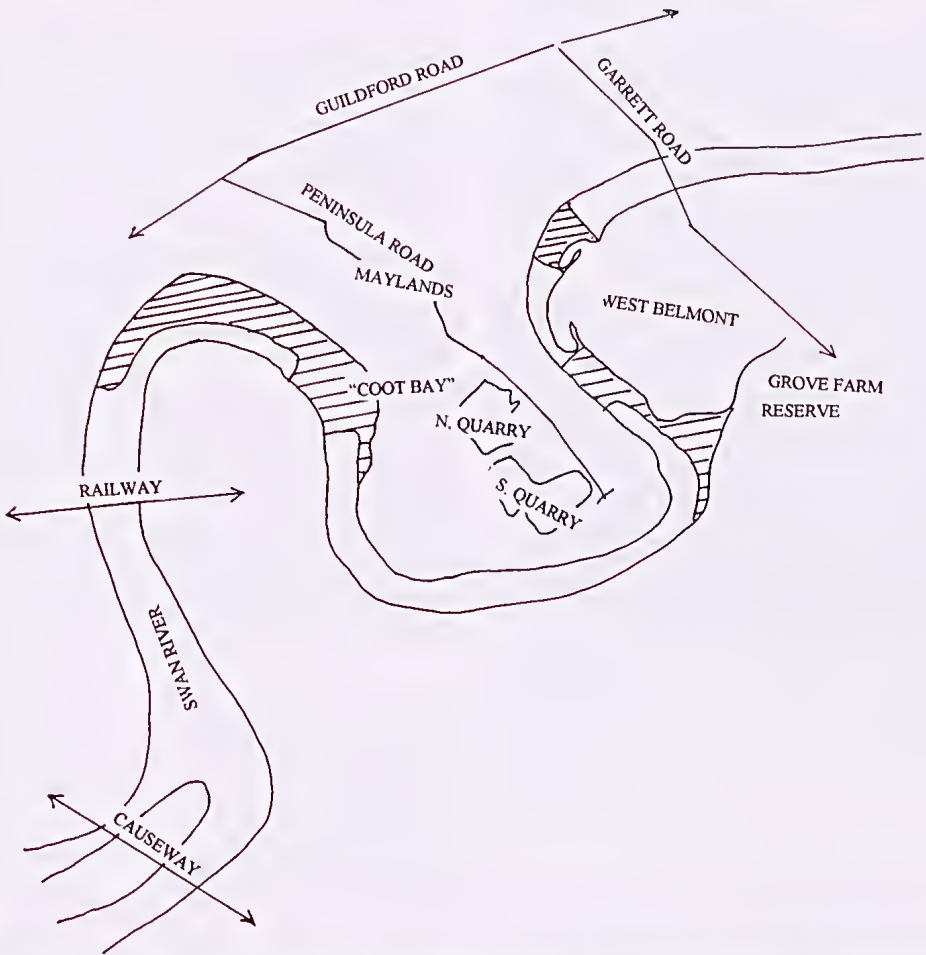


Figure 2. Map of Swan River at Maylands showing main areas of Coot distribution hatched.

population of about 100 Coots during autumn but only 10 or so occupy the quarry during the breeding season of July to December (Storr and Johnstone 1988). The Coot also occupies the partially flooded quarries in West Belmont. Again, numbers are at a maximum in autumn and at a minimum during the breeding season, and several pairs bred there in the spring of 1991.

CONCLUSION

The Swan River at Maylands would appear to be a refuge for the Coot during its non-breeding season, and it vacates the river during its breeding season, presumably to breed on the swamps and temporary waters after adequate rainfall.

As the species shows a similar pattern of occupation on the larger, local wetlands and the Maylands and West Belmont quarries, and the numbers in autumn far exceed the numbers that breed there, it could be assumed that these wetlands are also refuges for the Coot in autumn, and that these large numbers of Coots migrate to the temporary wetlands to breed after adequate rainfall.

A good project for some keen birdwatcher would be to see how far up the Swan River the Coot occurs and plot the location and numbers where it occurs.

REFERENCES

- ROBBINS, C.S., BRUUN, B., ZIM, H. & SINGER, A. 1983. *Birds of North America*. Western Publishing Company, New York, U.S.A.
- SERVENTY, D.L. 1948. The Birds of the Swan River District, Western Australia. *Emu* 47: 241-286.
- SERVENTY, D.L. & WHITTELL, H.M. 1976. *Birds of Western Australia*, Uni of W.A. press, Perth, W.A.
- SLATER, P., SLATER, P. & SLATER, R. 1989. *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds*. Kevin Weldon & Assoc. Willoughby, N.S.W., Aust.
- STORR, G.M. & JOHNSTONE, R.E. 1988. Birds of the Swan Coastal Plain and adjacent seas and islands. *Rec. West. Aust. Mus. Suppl.* 28.
- STRANGER, R.H. 1993. A Bird List from the Maylands Peninsula, Suburban Perth, W.A. *West. Aust. Nat.* 19: 257-264.